



The Board's Very Own Peter Principle

Are you letting the Peter Principle take shape in your board room?

BY MIRIAM MAYHEW CARVER

The board's job is one of significant, real importance. It is not a ceremonial job but one which carries ponderous accountabilities. It makes sense for boards to recruit members in such a way as to increase the probability of board leadership, not to handicap that potential.

Many organizations have a tradition of acquiring board members by promoting volunteers from service work to board work. This recruitment method seems to be based on the philosophy that accomplishment, or at least longevity, in a variety of volunteer jobs is appropriate preparation for governorship.

A large health charity with which I recently consulted used a great many volunteers to help deliver services. When volunteers showed commitment, staff members often asked them to serve

on board committees. Eventually, some of these volunteers were invited to join the board of directors. This was an honor, and to refuse was socially awkward and tantamount to declining a promotion.

Notice that with this method, which is not uncommon, the board is designed to be composed of people recruited by staff for their ability to perform staff work. Such a design raises questions. For example:

- Is board work the same as staff work?
- Is ability at staff work a good predictor of ability at board work?
- Is it possible that there are people who would be good board members who are not available to the board through this recruitment method?
- Is it possible that the staff may be deprived of good volunteers by

virtue of the co-option by the board?

My health charity client had believed that staff work and committee work were good training for prospective board members until it learnt the Policy Governance model.¹ It was then that it realized that board member skills could be found in people unsuited to and unavailable for service-level volunteer jobs. It also realized that people valuable as service-level volunteers don't necessarily have the ability to be good board members.

The aptitudes of different people differ. There is no moral judgment in such a statement but simply a description of fact. Unfortunately, to expect that people will have skills in a variety of unrelated areas leads to awkwardness, hurt, and embarrassment when

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this is found to be untrue in a particular case.

Such a case arose very recently with a client organization of mine. The organization was seeking to make a difference in the lives of developmentally disabled people. Its board promoted volunteers "through the ranks" much as the health charity did. And on the board were some delightful, concerned people who were utterly unsuited to the conceptual task of governing. One such board member was Anne. Anne was a middle-aged woman who had been a board member for some years and was still a service volunteer in the agency. She made no apologies for preferring her hands-on volunteer work to her board work, though she retained her board seat nonetheless out of a sense that as a volunteer with seniority, this was her obligation. The staff told me that Anne was a very valuable help to them. She was sensitive and yet firm with the children, fiercely supportive of their right to be individuals, and demonstrated a warmth and acceptance that was a joy to behold.

On the board, according to many of her board colleagues and to Anne herself, Anne was a non-contributor. She couldn't understand her role and didn't like it. The board's adoption of Policy Governance² made this worse, since not only did the job seem harder to Anne, but also the change seemed to her to be an indictment of the board's previous efforts.

What a shame. What an unnecessary hurt to such a good-hearted and effective volunteer. And how easy to avoid. Boards should define their jobs carefully and recruit members who have the skills to perform governance tasks. They should look for conceptually flexible people who

enjoy examining and deciding the values about events, not the events themselves. They should recruit people who can both enjoy diversity in debate and support a group decision. They should look for people who are able to focus on the intended effects of the organization, not the means of attaining those effects. They should seek big-picture thinkers. They shouldn't confine their search to people who are already volunteers, but more rigorously seek board members from among the ownership in general. And they should celebrate and respect the many volunteers who have skills other than those they seek, for these volunteers have a gift to offer, too. Their "unpaid staff" skill is a different but not lower-order gift.

If boards hold on to the unrealistic expectation that good service volunteers make good board members, they will continue to place individuals like Anne in untenable and painful positions. Looking for people with abilities that fit the job description will spare volunteers the heartache of a sense of obligation to a job that is disliked and unwanted.

And boards that recruit based on promoting volunteers from one job to another regardless of the job requirements necessarily risk seeing the board's very own Peter Principle take shape. ■

Footnotes

¹For details on the Policy Governance board model, see John Carver in "Selected References," especially *Boards that Make a Difference*.

²Ibid.

Selected References

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Miriam Carver, with her husband John Carver, is author of A New Vision of Board Leadership: Governing the Community College (ACCT, Washington, 1994), Reinventing Your Board: A Step by Step Guide to Implementing Policy Governance (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1997), and a number of booklets in the CarverGuide Series on Effective Board Governance (Jossey-Bass, 1996 and 1997). She is a Policy Governance consultant with clients in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Before opening her consulting practice, she worked in management positions in health and social service organizations in Canada and was CEO of Canada's first AIDS hospice. She is a British subject and Canadian citizen and resides with her husband in Atlanta.

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